THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY'S PASTORAL LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF SCOTLAND,

ON THE

PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CHURCH.

FRIENDS AND BRETHREN,

We are moved, by a sense of duty, to address to you a few words of affectionate and solemn admonition in this day of darkness and perplexity, while we deeply feel the pain of separation from many highly esteemed fellow-workers, with whom we had hoped to be associated through life in labours of love and in the ministry of reconciliation, "standing fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel." In the bonds of the Gospel we would have gladly retained them, but it has seemed good to them to dissolve the union which has hitherto subsisted between them and us, as children of the same Father, and servants of one Master who is in heaven. In our intercourse with our brethren in time past, it has been our unfeigned desire to exercise ourselves in having consciences void of offence; but we venture not to affirm that, without any blame of ours, offences have come. Conscious how natural it is to offend in word, how difficult it is to understand our errors, how easy it is to deceive our own hearts, how ensnaring it is to give way to variance and strife, without setting a watch before the lips, and keeping the heart with all diligence, in the exercise of forbearance, we are at this time specially called upon to search and try our ways, that, by the light of the quickening and powerful Word of Truth, piercing to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit, we may clearly discern wherefore it is that the Lord hath a controversy with our Church and nation, as if in his hot displeasure, kindled by our multiplied provocations, he had purposed to disperse his congregation which he purchased of old, to destroy the foundations of many generations, to break the rod of his inheritance which he redeemed, to loathe and reject this Mount Zion wherein he desired to dwell, and whose provision he has long abundantly blessed, to forsake the faithful cities which the people of his holiness possessed; and, as if he ceased to visit with the light of his countenance and the joy of his salvation the sanctuaries where our fathers praised him, and where, at the glad seasons of communion, the small and the great, the weak and the strong, the young and the old, all as equals and companions, flowing together to the goodness of the Lord their Saviour, were brought into the banqueting-house, that, sitting down at the same table, under the banner of love, they might eat of his bread and drink of the wine which he had mingled, in memorial of everlasting kindness, and in the blessed hope of everlasting glory. When we call to remembrance the ancient times, when, not without reason, our Jerusalem possessed a name of honour among the nations, and when her churches, throughout all her borders, had rest and were edified, and her people, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied, we cannot, without heaviness of heart, contemplate the scattering of our flocks, nor can we refrain from saying to God our rock, who was the hope of our fathers, and their Saviour in the time of trouble, "Why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land? Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee?" If, after looking for peace, we have found no good, and for the time of healing, the troubles of our heart have been enlarged, it would be presumptuous to say, "We are verily guiltless concerning our brethren;" for we cannot forget that the faithful disciples of our Lord, when they thus judged, were sharply rebuked; because, while they thought that they had a zeal for God and no lack of charity towards men, they knew not what manner of spirit they were of. So may it have been too often with us; so may it have been with others: but, instead of indulging in unfavourable constructions of the professions and practices of those who are absent, we feel it to be incumbent on us to judge our-

selves without partiality, that we may put no stumbling-block, or occasion to fall, in our brethren's way, and that thus we may be the better prepared for following the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

It is our firm purpose, through the aid of grace, to hold fast the form of sound words in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus; not desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another; not boasting of things without our measure; but, according to the measure which God hath distributed to us, exercising with meekness the authority which the Lord hath given us, for edification and not for destruction.

Towards our brethren who have gone out from us, it is our earnest desire to let brotherly love continue. We cannot admit that the course which they have followed is one to which they have been impelled by an irresistible necessity; but such appears to be their deliberate conviction, and we give them credit for their sincerity. Under the favour of Divine Providence, the foundations of the Church of Scotland were laid in most difficult times, through the instrumentality of a few upright men of obscure condition, valiant for the truth, and unwearied in their apostolical enterprises, who—little countenanced by the possessors of wealth or power, but convinced that Christian rulers, being "appointed not only for civil policy, but also for maintenance of the true religion," are bound to provide for the supply of religious instruction and the administration of divine ordinances to the whole population—invoked the aid of the supreme council of the nation to secure a permanent provision for the teachers of the reformed faith, and to protect from all violation and corruption the doctrine, worship, and government of the infant establishment. With this professed object, legislative enactments were passed at successive periods, some of them more and others less satisfactory. Even when the higher powers of the realm appeared to be most friendly to the cause of religious truth and the approved order of ecclesiastical government, it was by no means the general impression in the Church that sufficient support was yielded to the rights and immunities for which the faith of the State was understood to be pledged; but, in spite of multiplied discouragements, the faithful ministers of the Word—sickened though they were by the bitter experience of such hardships, indignities, and wrongs, as having their characters vilified, their just expectations frustrated, their lawful patrimony withholden or diverted to secular purposes, their personal liberty sometimes restrained, their wholesome discipline often set at defiance, their judicatories occasionally discharged from meeting, and their appeals for redress of such grievances disregarded—did not think themselves entitled to forego their legitimate claims to the stinted advantages which the poor of the people derived from an inadequately endowed Establishment, so long as in their several spheres of ordinary labour they possessed, even in a limited measure, the privilege of preaching the Gospel of the grace of God, and, with all the confidence becoming their sacred vocation, teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus, and the interests of his everlasting kingdom. As we also have been taught to consider it as one of the highest and most indispensable obligations of a Christian government, to furnish the means of instructing the people, not only in all the arts essential to their temporal improvement and comfort, but in the doctrine according to godliness, we cannot perceive any sufficient grounds for leading those who know the truth, and have been taught of God to speak it in love, to the edifying of the body of Christ, and who fully admit that religious establishments are compatible with the principles of Christianity, to come to the determination of withdrawing from the cultivation of those portions of the vineyard which have been committed to their peculiar husbandry, abandoning to the hands of unknown, and probably less experienced labourers, the facilities for sowing seed of untried quality, it may chance of wheat or of some other grain. We trust that there is no cause for apprehending that the precious seed of the Word is to be contaminated by any unholy admixture, or that, through unpardonable remissness or recklessness, any are to be put in trust with the Gospel, who will corrupt the Word of God or handle it deceitfully; but we cannot conceal from ourselves that, in proportion to the number of places to be supplied, the difficulty of filling them all with able ministers of the New Testament will be increased; and, while we feel it to be a disadvantage that so much is required to be done without delay, we are solicitous to impress on all who have any power or influence in the appointment of ministers the solemn obligation to proceed in this matter with most

serious deliberation and vigilance. With equal earnestness we admonish all presbyteries to guard against any relaxation, in taking the requisite trials for ordination, that they may keep themselves pure from the risk of laying hands suddenly on any man, and thus becoming a partaker of other men's sin. Meanwhile we trust that none of the ministers or elders who still adhere to the Establishment will hastily relinquish the stations which they have hitherto occupied, and which, according to our clear conviction, are to be regarded as talents for the improvement of which the occupiers are bound to give an account. Without questioning the purity of the views of those who have been otherwise minded in this matter, it is our purpose to abide in the condition assigned us by the Sovereign Disposer of our lot, not without the hope of having a way opened up, under the direction of a wise and gracious Providence, for supplying whatever is deficient, defining whatever is doubtful, and rectifying whatever is liable to abuse in those matters concerning which there has been occasionally a collision between the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, particularly in regard to the boundaries of their several jurisdictions, and the various conditions essential to the constitution of the relation between pastors and their flocks.

It is our firm determination ever to maintain that, in all questions purely spiritual, the judicatories of the Church have the sole right of judging; and though, in the words of the Confession of Faith, one of the standards which we are bound to uphold, "the civil magistrate has authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church; that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed;" yet, according to another venerable authority, the Second Book of Discipline, the civil power ought not to prescribe any rule how these objects should be accomplished, otherwise than by commanding the spiritual powers to exercise their office according to the Word of God; and particularly in preaching, ministering the sacraments, and executing censures, should command the ministers to observe the divine rule contained in the Word, and should punish the transgressors by civil means. But these principles do not involve any sacrifice of Christian liberty, or any surrender of spiritual independence. Neither the King, as supreme, nor any judge or governor placed under him, is entitled to issue a mandate to a Church court to ordain a minister, or to insist that any minister shall admit, to the privilege of baptism or the communion, any of his flock, of whose due preparation he does not possess satisfactory evidence.

This is not a fit occasion for discussing the limits of the several provinces of spiritual and civil rulers. When any of our authoritative books assert the right of the magistrate to command the ministers to observe the rule prescribed in the Word of God, they declare his power to be confined to external things; and they never fail to combine with these declarations the doctrine of the supremacy of the King and Head of the Church, and the perpetuity of the government which he has instituted in the hands of Church officers distinct from the civil magistrate. By these principles we are determined to abide; and, to prevent any risk of undue interference with the spiritual functions appertaining to the judicatories of the Church, we are most anxious that all grounds for such an apprehension shall be removed by an express declaration of the Legislature. We are not less anxious that there may be no pretence for disputing the right of the people to express fully whatever objections they think fit to offer to any presentee, or for challenging the power of the presbytery to judge of the validity of all objections.

In the mean time, we entertain the hope, that, while all the ministers within our Church will feel that they are called upon to redouble their diligence in the great work to which they are called, the people will unite in strengthening their hands and cheering their labours, by promoting the sacred objects for which a Christian ministry has been constituted. Every father of a family ought to feel how much he may facilitate the work of his spiritual guide, and at the same time promote his own happiness and the best interests of those who are dear to him, by devoting his eager attention to the religious instruction of his children and dependents. It is no less the duty of every one to whom God has given wealth, to approve himself a father to the poor, not merely by the supply

of their temporal necessities, but by contributing liberally to the means of training them up in the way that leadeth to life everlasting. Equally important is it to set an example of steady adherence to the great principles of the Reformation. We desire with the utmost earnestness to stir up every member of our Church, and every inhabitant of the land, to the habitual cultivation of personal piety, and the regular observance of domestic devotion, as well as attendance on public ordinances in the house of God. The peace and prosperity of our Church cannot be maintained if these sacred duties be neglected. Be assured that no solid tranquillity can exist in the minds of those who are strangers to that peace of God which passeth all understanding. The true excellency of dignity and of power is attained only by those who, believing in the name of Christ, have received power to become sons of God, and whose hearts are fixed on the contemplation of the majesty of the divine character, the beauty of the divine holiness, the riches of the divine grace, and the ineffable glories of the kingdom of righteousness. We cannot too often reflect that it is righteousness that exalteth a nation, and that, in the humblest condition of human life, the righteous is more excellent than his neighbour. No reliance can be placed on the honourable consistency of those who are not sanctified through the truth; and whenever the sense of religious obligation becomes languid, it may be predicted that the dissolution of social order is at hand. There is no safety in the alliance of mere worldly-minded men, whose thoughts are engrossed with the fading interests which, in the day of death, will be found to be only vanity of vanities. The stability of our times depends on the prevalence of the wisdom which is indissolubly associated with the fear of the Lord; and to the acquisition of this heavenly wisdom we entreat all the people under our charge to devote their unwearying diligence. Look back to the years of former generations, when glory dwelt in our land, and when almost every cottage and chamber, however meanly provided with this world's goods, enclosed some of the treasured jewels of the Lord of Hosts. "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord and that thought upon his name." Then might be heard, day after day, and night after night, "the voice of rejoicing and salvation in the tabernacles of the righteous." Then were the multitudes of those that believed of one heart and of one soul, all seeking the good of Jerusalem, and all rejoicing in the gladness of a righteous nation that kept the truth and gloried in the salvation of the Lord. We cannot expect times of refreshing to come to us from the presence of the Lord, unless we follow in the steps of our fathers, every one shewing the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end—waiting, in the exercise of faith and patience, "until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest; then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field, and the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever."

"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified." "And may the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means." Earnestly as we desire that you may be established in the present truth, we trust that you will be on your guard against all animosity and unbecoming vehemence in the discussion of questions which are apt to engender angry strife. We do not apprehend that you will fail to observe the courtesies of life in all your intercourse with those who have renounced our communion. We trust that you will cherish towards them the most cordial kindness.—"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil-speaking be put away from you, with all malice." If you should ever be assailed with reviling, revile not again—and let no emulation or strife find a place in your hearts—but pray that the time may soon arrive when all the former troubles shall be forgotten, and when the whole family of the faithful throughout the world shall dwell together in unity, as those who, in the faith of the Son of God, look forward to the blessed day when, having escaped from all the errors and the frailties of this mortal existence, they shall all be one in the presence of the Great God their Saviour, in whose presence is fulness of joy, and at whose right hand are pleasures for evermore.